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# ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM OF ZOOLOGY

## TORONTO

### LEAFLET NO. 7\*

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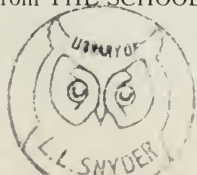
## WILD LIFE CONSERVATION

**M**ANY thoughtful persons are distressed at the rapidity with which the natural life of our country is being destroyed. The realization that if present trends are continued, many fine species of our wild mammal, bird and fish life are doomed to extinction, has led to much talk about Conservation. The problem is much more difficult than is generally realized and involves nothing short of a change in the attitude of the people as a whole. To date Canadians have been a nation of pioneers. To the early settlers, forests and wild life were enemies to be destroyed, and that attitude of mind is still the dominant one among us. Until we can bring about a complete change in our attitude toward nature, no real advance in wild life conservation is possible.

Much of the early destruction of nature was necessary, of course. Forests had to be removed before agricultural crops could be grown. Even before Europeans came, the Indians who lived in Southern Ontario used to burn the trees on tracts of land where they wished to grow corn and other native plants. When the United Empire Loyalists and other settlers began to move into Upper Canada after the American War of Independence, their first task was to make clearings in which to build their homes and plant their crops. Fine trees which would to-day be valuable for lumber were burned in great piles. There was no other way to dispose of much of the timber that had to be cleared away to provide fields for the settlers' crops. Some of the wild animals had to be destroyed because they killed the settlers' domestic animals or ate his crops. As long as considerable wild areas surround a pioneer's clearing, wolves and bears are likely to cause trouble by killing his calves and pigs, but these predatory animals disappear as clearing advances. The desire for their destruction, however, continues even after the need for it has ceased, so that to most of us bears and wolves are always to be killed.

In the early days, wild creatures were also killed for the food they provided. Venison, wild pigeons, salmon, and many other kinds of meat and fish which the woods and streams provided, were welcome additions to the pioneer's larder. If crops failed, food was scarce, and

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even at the best of times there was little variety. Wild meat was therefore appreciated not only because it supplemented food raised on the farmer's fields, but because it provided a change from the monotony of home-grown fare. We must therefore not blame the pioneer for his destruction of the woods and the animals that lived in them; it was necessary to the opening up of the country that the conditions which nature had produced should be replaced by man-made farms and towns. But our attitudes and habits of thought do not change as rapidly as external conditions, and the killing of wild creatures persists long after the need for securing food in this way has passed. There are still too many people who will kill a splendid moose or catch fifty fish if they can and leave their flesh to decay in the woods. The lust to kill for the sake of killing is still very strong in our people. Until it is largely eradicated, there is little hope of saving our wild life.

Wild animals have been killed in Canada for still another reason. Long before our country was regarded as an agricultural land, it was valued because of the furs it produced. Many of the early French explorers were interested in this trade. In 1627 the monopoly of the trade in furs was given to "The Company of One Hundred Associates", of which Richelieu and Champlain were members. The English, not to be outdone by the French, formed the Hudson's Bay Company in 1670 and obtained control over all the regions whose waters emptied into Hudson Bay. The struggle between the English and French fur traders was the occasion of much of the conflict between England and France in Canada in those early days. Furs produced by the wild animals of Canada are still worth ten million dollars a year, but this amount could be greatly increased, if proper methods of conservation were employed. Rivalry in the exploitation of the fur trade has persisted right down to the present. It is not now a rivalry between nations but between individuals. If two or more trappers are taking furs from a certain area, each takes all he can. If a beaver colony is found, every animal is killed. The man who locates it, fears that if he leaves a pair to produce young for the next year, his rival will kill them at the first opportunity; he takes the attitude that he may as well clean out the colony as leave it for some one else to do. The result is that wild animals are hunted and trapped to extinction. When the Indians occupied the country, the right of certain families to hunt and trap over definite areas was recognized and respected. Then there was no inducement to take the last beaver or the last fox. On the other hand, it was the part of wisdom to leave a breeding stock to ensure fur for the coming years. If an area were over-trapped, it meant lean years in the future. There was then some inducement to apply conservation principles. To-day in too many parts of the country the inducement is rather to take the last animal



that can be found. Until governments allocate the trapping rights over certain areas to individuals, families or groups the tendency to extermination will continue. When traplines are registered, trappers acquire an interest in building up the animal populations of the areas over which they trap.

The very abundance of animal life which once filled our forests and waters was responsible for much of the recklessness exhibited in its destruction. We still hear references to "our inexhaustible natural resources." This is merely a survival of the pioneer point of view that our wild life was so abundant that there was no need to take thought of the future. Canadians were no wiser than the people of Ohio, whose legislature decided in 1857 that "The passenger pigeon needs no protection; wonder-fully prolific, having the vast forests of the north as its breeding grounds, travelling hundreds of miles in search of food, it is here to-day and elsewhere to-morrow, and no ordinary destruction can lessen them, or be missed from the myriads that are yearly produced." A glimpse of those times is afforded by an account of a "squirrel hunt", written in 1855. It lists the following wild creatures killed in one day: "1 wild cat, 7 red foxes, 29 raccoons, 76 woodchucks, 101 rabbits, 21 owls, 42 hawks, 103 partridges, 14 quails, 39 crows, 4,497 gray, red, black and striped squirrels, 25 wild ducks, besides unnumbered pigeons, jays, woodpeckers, etc." There were a few thoughtful souls in those days who knew that there must inevitably be an end to such slaughter as was then going on.

To-day a larger number of people are alive to the danger of extermination that faces many of our splendid birds and mammals, but the majority are still not convinced of the danger, and as long as interest in wild life conservation is limited to a few, the number of our wild creatures will continue to shrink year after year.

An example of how proper management can rescue a species threatened with extinction and restore it to abundance again, is afforded by a consideration of the fur seal of the North Pacific. This animal, which is the source of the true seal skin, spends the summer on the Pribilof Islands off the west coast of Alaska and winters off the coasts of California. It was formerly hunted not only on the summer and winter grounds, but large numbers were also killed while they were migrating through the ocean between their winter and summer homes. Pelagic sealing, as the killing of seals at sea was called, led to a very serious disagreement between the United States and Canada. Finally the matter was amicably settled by an agreement between the countries concerned. By the Pelagic Sealing Treaty of 1911, the killing of seals on their annual migrations was prohibited, but Canada was to be given a share of the

money derived from the seals killed on the Pribilof islands. The government of the United States took charge of the killing of the seals on these northern islands, and after making a study of the habits and life history of the animals, decided that only males were to be killed, the females being spared to raise more young. It was found that a large male seal takes possession of several females and guards them against other males. In the fights which occur between males for the possession of females, not only are the hides of the males so torn as to make the fur useless, but many are killed. It is therefore an advantage to reduce the number of males and sell their hides as fur. Following the signing of the Pelagic Sealing Treaty, the killing of fur seals was prohibited for a period of five years. A careful census taken by the United States Government each year showed that the seal herd increased from 215,738 in 1912 to 530,237 in 1919. The killing of animals was begun in 1918 when nearly 35,000 were taken. This had risen in 1934 to more than 50,000.

The history of this animal indicates that uncontrolled, competitive exploitation will bring a species to the verge of extinction, whereas properly regulated killing based on knowledge is capable of ensuring a continuous return indefinitely.

The management of our wild life resources will never be successful until it is based on knowledge of the habits and life histories of all our wild creatures. The chief features of the life histories are known in the case of most of the larger animals, but there is need for much more knowledge of their diseases, food requirements, and habitat needs, before we can hope to manage them as successfully as has been done in the case of the Alaska fur seal.

The matter of wild life conservation cannot be better summed up than in the words of H. G. Wells: "In these disordered days, a stupid, uncontrollable massacre of animal species goes on—from certain angles of vision it is a thing almost more tragic than human miseries. . . . It is a strange thing in human history to note how little has been done since the Bronze Age in taming, using, befriending, and appreciating the animal life about us, and in changing our modified instincts into an interest, not in the deaths, but in the lives of beasts, and leading to fresh and perhaps very strange and beautiful attempts to befriend these pathetic kindred lower animals we no longer fear as enemies, hate as rivals, or need as slaves."

J. R. D.











